

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

W. W. MOORHOUSE (President, 1965)

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen :

When I first considered the topic which I should discuss this afternoon, I thought of offering a learned paper on some aspect of petrology, or a quasi-sermon on the problems of those who wish to be at once scientists, teachers, and human beings. But then I realized that something a little lighter would be appropriate, since the lecture would be delivered at a luncheon, to an audience who had spent a morning listening to scientific papers, were replete from a maritime fish dinner, and were looking forward to an afternoon of still more papers.

The etymology and history of words has always interested me, as has the subject of archeology, on which I have read all the popular and semi-popular books available to me. So I thought I might combine these into a brief and eclectic discussion on the Archeology of Mineral Names.

The archeologists with busy trowell
And fiendish glee, dead cities disembowell,
Or scavenge through old graves and rubbish piles,
With necrophilic zeal, ecstatic smiles.
The philo-log-ist on the other hand
Toils not, nor spins, nor rummages in sand,
Simply dissects some inoffensive word,
Until its obscene past is disinterred.
Thus, if we trace the names of gems and stones
Back to their source in other tongues and zones,
There's many a strange inversion,
And more than one perversion,
And fancied etymologies
In Plinyan anthologies. (Pliny, 77)

We know that syenite its name derived
From Syene's granite, of its quartz deprived,
And porphyry is named in ancient lists,
Due to its color, not its phenocrysts.
Nor have rock names alone thus suffered change;
Minerals have alterations passing strange:
Topaz, for one, from Sanskrit word for fire
Has truly undergone a change entire:
To Greeks it was the golden peridot,
And, logically enough, we also note
They called our topaz (which they found by night,
So Pliny says), the yellow chrysolite.
And, by the way, I've heard (and now I quote)
That Roman wedding rings bore peridot.*

*D. H. Gorman, personal communication.

And so to diamond, adamant of old,
 Unconquerably hard, and bright, and bold,
 The self-same root is "dame" whence we perpend
 A diamond is in truth a girl's best friend!
 Eternity, to Hindus, is the time
 To peneplane a diamond peak sublime,
 The which, each thousand years, some feathered freak
 Erôdes by wiping there his foolish beak;
 A long, long time, indeed, nay almost never,
 For, as you know, "a diamond is forever".

The sapphire too has altered with the years,
 For Pliny states the best of it appears,
 As blue as heaven, with golden spangles bright,
 By which he meant what we call lazurite;
 This comes from *azul*, arabic for blue,
 And azurite, I guess, comes from it too.

Smaragdus, as the Greeks and Romans called,
 The queen of gems, the cool green emerald
 By Arabs somewhat garbled on the way
 Changed to the name that we all use today.
 Although it's called by all the Em'rald Isle,
 The national stone of Eire's the chrysotile; (Kunz, 1913)
 St. Pat of serpents may have swept it clean,
 But could not rid it of its serpentine.
 The ancients also used smaragdus for
 Some turquoise, jasper, malachite, and more,
 Like chrysocolla, palely green and blue,
 Being interpreted means "golden glue",
 Whence we conclude the Grecians had confused
 It with green borax, for gold solder used. (Agricola, 1546)
 The turquoise, then, of derivation clear,
 Was known to Pliny as *callainus* dear.
 He claims 'twas knocked from icy ridges high
 By horsemen plying slings with deadly eye,
 A dodge not to be equalled, I'll be bound
 By even the most dedicate rock hound.
 In ancient days, the turquoise had much fame
 Because its colour dimmed with pallid shame
 At infidelity, or sadly paled
 If he who wore it lost his health and failed
 It had great virtue (this was known to all)
 To guard a man from damage in a fall.

From *piedra de hijada* jade's derived,
 Stone of the flanks* because 'twas once believed
 That by it kidneystones might be relieved.
 Thus the same sense as "nephrite" is contrived,
 So that not only in its form and shade,
 But in its virtue, nephrite's kin to jade.

While things medicinal are our concern,
 To carbuncle, the fiery, let us turn,
 From Latin for "a glowing coal", I've heard.
 It is to me a strangely ugly word,
 To designate so many glowing gems:
 Red ruby, fit for regal diadems,
 And balas ruby, garnet, and spinel,
 Some bearing in them ghostly stars as well.
 And almandite, although you might suspect
 It stems from almond, you'd be incorrect.
 Its source and not its shape's involved because
 It's garbled *lapis alabandicus*,
 The stone of Alabanda, though it's quite
 Unlike the green-streaked alaband(a)ite.

Although today they're generally despised,
 The forms of quartz were by the ancients prized,
 For gems and amulets and private seals,
 For vulgar show, and cups for drinking meals.

The purple amethyst, so it was said,
 Preserved from drunkenness the giddy head,
 Whence comes its name, as classics scholars know,
 And stingy hosts, whose wine was running low,
 Used amethystine cups, whose violet tint
 Gave even H₂O a vinous glint.

Chalcedony is named from Chalcedon,
 And Sard, from Sardes, each an ancient town.
 Carnelian answers for its colour pink
 The tint of flesh, though not so soft, I think.
 And onyx is the Grecian word for nail,
 Referring to its banded colours pale.
 Prase is derived from *prason*, which is Greek
 For the Welsh national vegetable, the leek;
 Jasper was also used for greenish chert,
 In ancient times, though no one would assert
 We should revive the ancient usage now. (So much for priority).
 The iris, with the rainbow's hues aglow,
 Though humble quartz, with artful innocence
 From sunlight white distills its subtle tints.

*This translation was taken from a Victorian dictionary—no doubt a modern one would give a more exact English equivalent.

The hyacinth (such euphony is here!)
 As jacinth in the Bible doth appear,
 And like so many lovely names of old,
 Included many species in its fold:
 Some zircons, garnets, topaz, and sapphires,
 All share the colour which the name requires.

There is no message in this poor conceit,
 This pot-pourri of mouldy tags and ends,
 But as I close, I'd modestly entreat
 Those whom till now I used to call my friends,
 When you attack a helpless mineral
 With microscope or an electron probe,
 With x-ray beam or mordant chemical,
 Just take the time, as whirls this frantic globe,
 To ponder on its colour, luster, frame,
 Yes, and enjoy its quaint or freakish name,
 So that you see it whole and all-in-all,
 A part of nature's wondrous world, however small.

The heliotrope, or bloodstone, known to fame,
 For an unusual virtue, as Greeks claim:
 When cherished with the flower of the same name,
 It makes the lucky holder disappear.
 A talisman I covet now and here!

Thank you.

LITERATURE CITED

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